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HUMAN STEAKS AND A WHISKEY CHASER

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Whiskey has brought trouble to many a man, but seldom in so bizarre a fashion as it did to Alfred Packer. He was not known as a hard drinker but he might as well have been and enjoyed it, for his denouement was brought about by liquor just as inexorably as it would had he been a confirmed soak.

It was a bitter winter night when Packer stumbled into Los Pinos Indian Agency in the Colorado Rockies and asked for whiskey. Between drinks he gasped a tale of starvation and exposure with five companions in the high fastness of the mountains. He told how he had lived for weeks on roots before making his way to human help.

After Packer was warmed and put to bed, one of his listeners remarked, "It seems kind of funny that a feller who had starved like he said would ask for whiskey instead of grub."

As the wayfarer recovered his strength during the following days he told the details of his story. His hearers marvelled that he had survived at all. During the previous autumn, he said, he was in Salt Lake City, and the town was humming with stories of the rich mining strikes in Colorado. He had joined twenty others in a venture to cross the mountains and look for gold.

Hard luck was with them from the first. Teams and wagons were lost in fording the tempestuous Green River, and the party struggled ahead on foot, sharing the meager rations of cracked barley they had salvaged from the disaster. Soon even this was gone, and despair was on them. When all hope seemed gone they were found by a band of Indians, who luckily proved to be friendly Utes. At Chief Ouray's camp on the Uncompahgre River the starving whites were fed and sheltered.

Packer was not popular with the Indians. He was an epileptic, and his occasional fits were not soothing to the superstitious nature

of the savages. Ouray treated the whites generously, however, and cared for them several weeks. They stayed on as winter set in.

As uneventful weeks dragged by the travellers' spirits rose with their improving health, and they tired of the monotonous life of an Indian camp. In small groups they determined to resume their journey, ignoring Ouray's warning of winter's perils in the Rockies. Packer and five others were the first to go. The chief gave them a week's supply of food, and saw them go with the foreboding prediction, "Your journey will end in death."

The original twenty-one who had left Salt Lake were a mixed lot, and the five who chose to follow Packer were typical. Frank Miller was a rheumatic German butcher and getting old, as were Israel Swan and James Humphrey, prospectors. George Noon was a 17-year-old drifter. Shannon Bell, an Englishman, had red hair and a disposition to match. Packer himself was a powerful young man, in spite of his disease. He had come to Utah from Pennsylvania, where his family had influence and wealth. He wore a heavy black beard, and it was surprising to hear the high, thin voice come out of him. Two fingers were missing from his left hand. He was in a chain gang before being bailed out by one of the organizers of the expedition, who believed his claim that he was familiar with the country they were to enter.

As the six climbed into the high mountains they soon began to fear that Ouray knew what he was talking about. The blizzards grew increasingly frequent and severe. The wild game had gone to the lower hills for refuge from the storms, and the party's food was getting low.

Packer was dramatic in his description of the suffering they had experienced. When the provisions given them by Ouray were gone, they dug in the snow for roots. Three of them wore goatskin moccasins, and the starving men tried to gnaw on these for nourishment. Matches were gone, so they used a coffee pot to carry the coals of the campfire from one stop to the next. They came to a lake, and tried without success to fish through the ice. That night some of them prayed.

Fears frayed nerves, and the five men blamed Packer for losing their way. The youngster, Noon, accidentally stepped on Bell's foot, and the big Englishman threatened to kill him until old man Swan intervened. During one of his convulsions, Packer related, he fell in the campfire and was badly burned. He was unable to go on and, fearing for their own lives if they delayed, the others went on without him.

He managed to keep the fire going, but hadn't the strength to search for food. On the third day he saw a wolf trotting along the creek bed, carrying a sheep's shank in its mouth. Packer's shot missed its mark, but the animal dropped the shank as it ran. With this spoiling meat and some rosebuds dug from the snow he survived until his burns healed enough for him to walk. It was in this condition that he stumbled on the agency at Los Pinos.

Most who heard the story were sympathetic with Packer. The spring progressed and he went on to the mining camp of Saguache,

where he frequented the saloons and repeated his story to anyone who would listen.

Other members of the original twenty-one began to straggle into Saguache, but the five who had accompanied Packer failed to appear. The man who had voiced misgivings when Packer first asked for liquor began to engage the interest of others. He prevailed on some of the Salt Lake men to watch his suspect, and one of them noticed Packer smoking a pipe which had belonged to Miller. Further inquiry disclosed that Packer, who was broke when he left Utah, had bought a seventy-dollar horse and paid from a wallet which answered the description of one Swan had carried.

Suspicions grew, and it was decided that Packer should be held until more was learned about the whereabouts of his companions. He was detained in the shack which served Saguache for a jail, and prospectors passing through town were asked to watch for the missing five.

It was an easterner who found them. A magazine had sent an illustrator to Colorado to report on frontier conditions and this man, walking through a spruce forest high in the mountains, came upon five bodies. Four men with their skulls split were lying in a row. The fifth was lying apart, his head severed from his body. The pockets of the victims were empty.

Word of the discovery brought the authorities hurrying to the scene. Once there, the man who had been curious about Packer's appetite learned the answer to his question. Neat steaks had been cut from the flanks of the corpses, and a path had been worn between their bodies and the campfire.

When confronted with these disclosures Packer remained calm. He admitted having sustained himself on the flesh of his companions, but denied that he had killed them. One day when the six were seated around the campfire, he said, he had climbed a nearby mountain to get his bearings. He took the rifle along in hopes of seeing game. When he returned he came upon Bell, cooking a piece of meat at the fire. The others appeared to be asleep under their blankets but, as Packer drew near, he saw that they were dead. "Bell saw me coming," Packer related, "grabbed an axe, and came on me." Packer shot in self-defense; Bell fell wounded and Packer dispatched him with the axe.

As he examined the others he saw that young Noon's leg was mutilated, and he guessed the source of the meat Bell had been broiling. Faced with starvation, and frenzied by the smell of the cooking steak, he ate it.

Packer said he didn't know how long he stayed there. He was dazed from the experience and could not recall much of what had happened, but he did remember butchering some of the bodies for meat. When his strength returned he set out again, taking along some of the human steaks for nourishment.

News of the cannibal's confession was circulated, and men spoke of lynching him. He grew restive in his makeshift lockup and, one day when the sheriff left his charge in the custody of his small son, Packer escaped. Some thought the sheriff's negligence might have been encouraged by a share of his prisoner's loot.

The fugitive vanished. Years elapsed. The principals scattered

through the West. Among these was Jean Cazaubon, called "Frenchy," who had been one of the twenty-one who left Salt Lake. Frenchy drifted north to Wyoming and became an itinerant peddler on the road from Cheyenne to Fort Fetterman.

Across the river from Fetterman was Hog Ranch, a "recreational community" for military personnel and camp-followers. The establishment had all the customary forms of amusement and attracted many of the less civic-minded citizens of the territory. One evening in the spring of '83, nine years after Packer's escape, Frenchy drove his buggy into Hog Ranch and prepared to spend the night. While in his room waiting for supper to be announced he heard through the partition a high, thin voice which he thought familiar. When he went to the table he met the owner of the voice, who was introduced as John Schwartze.

Not until the man reached for a plate and exposed his left hand with two fingers missing was Frenchy sure it was Packer. The fugitive appeared not to remember Cazaubon, but it was with nervous appetite that the little Frenchman hurried through his meal. Once finished he fled to the sheriff.

Deputy Malcolm Campbell had already had official dealings with "Schwartze." The latter had gotten involved in a drunken brawl several weeks before and Campbell, not dreaming of his true identity, had casually locked him up. At the trial the next morning the complaining witness had experienced a change of heart and the prisoner was freed for lack of evidence.

When Campbell responded to Cazaubon's summons to Hog Ranch he found that Packer had gone. He learned that the man-eater was mining a claim at Chief Crazy Horse's old place on Wagon Hound creek, and set out in a buckboard. His brother Dan went along in support. As they approached the cabin they saw their quarry and ordered him to surrender.

"This is the first time in 20 years I haven't had my gun," said Packer. "If I had I'd have got you both."

They drove back to Fetterman, Packer riding beside Malcolm in the seat and Dan perched on a bedroll behind them with a Winchester. Sheriff Campbell later said they talked during the long ride, and Packer told him the steaks from his friends' haunches were "the sweetest meat I ever tasted."

No statesman riding through the country ever got more public attention than Packer as the train took him back to Saguache. Hundreds turned out for a look at the cannibal, and at Cheyenne the sheriff obligingly led his captive to the platform so all could see.

Packer was afraid. He recalled what had happened to "Big Nose George" at Rawlins. George had been a successful train robber until he killed a deputy sheriff, and when he was being taken through Rawlins a group of the deceased deputy's friends met Big Nose at the train and hanged him to a telegraph pole. They let him swing there for several days, for the salutory effect on other prospective sheriff-shooters, and then cut him down and divided him up for souvenirs. A leading banker got George's jawbone for a penholder and had the hide from George's chest tanned for a pair

of shoes. Other Rawlins citizens carried wallets made from the epidermis of the departed felon.

Packer's captors got him safely to Saguache. The talk of lynching was revived, but most seemed confident that the voracious one could this time be entrusted to the regular machinery of justice. The trial was held in the Hinsdale county court. There was some delay in finding twelve jurymen in those sparsely settled mountains, but once under way the jury and judge Gerry did not disappoint. After the guilty verdict had been read the judge delivered a unique sentence in the history of American jurisprudence.

"In 1874," spoke the judge, "you, in company with five companions, passed through this beautiful mountain valley where now stands the town of Lake City. At that time the hand of man had not marred the beauties of nature. The picture was fresh from the hand of the Great Artist who created it. You and your companions camped at the base of a grand old mountain, in sight of the place you now stand, on the banks of a stream as pure and beautiful as was ever traced by the finger of God upon the bosom of earth. Your every surrounding was calculated to impress your heart and nature with the omnipotence of Diety and the helplessness of your own feeble life. In this goodly favored spot you conceived your murderous designs.

"You and your victims had a weary march, and when the shadows of the mountain fell upon your little party and night drew her sable curtain around you, your unsuspecting victims lay down on the ground and were soon lost in the sleep of the weary; and when thus sweetly unconscious of danger from any quarter and particularly from you, their trusted companion, you cruelly and brutally slew them all. Whether your murderous hand was guided by the misty light of the moon, or the flickering blaze of the campfire, you only can tell. No eye saw the bloody deed performed; no ear save your own caught the groans of your dying victims. You then and there robbed the living of life, and then robbed the dead of the reward of honest toil."

One of the spectators alleged that the judge, a zealous Democrat, finished his sentence with these words:

"To the other sickening details of your crime, Alfred Packer, I will not refer. Silence is kindness. Suffice it to say, God damn your soul, you have eaten up the Democratic majority of Hindsdale County! I sentence you to be hanged by the neck until you are dead, dead, dead!"

Everybody but Packer applauded the verdict. As the gallows were nearing completion and the inhabitants of Hindsdale County made eager plans for the ceremony, Packer's lawyers hastened to the Supreme Court. They pointed out that Packer had been convicted under a murder law which was enacted *after* the crime, and every freshman law student knew this was an ex post facto proceeding repugnant to the Constitution. The Supreme Court judges had to agree, but they prolonged the suspense as far as possible and it was just a few days before the execution was scheduled that they

acted. They ordered a new trial to be held where Packer's enemies could be presumed fewer, and for this purpose selected the famous old mining town of Leadville.

Thus no murder proceedings could be brought against the defendant and, since no one had thought to legislate against eating people, it looked as if the prosecution was blocked. However, a diligent search of the statutes produced an old manslaughter law which provided a maximum sentence of eight years. Packer was promptly convicted of the manslaughter of all five victims and sentenced to eight years per head. That summer he arrived at the Canon City penitentiary to begin serving his forty year term.

Still protesting that no man should be made to pay forty years for a few square meals, Packer's lawyers continued their struggle for his freedom. Their fees were paid from a legal fund maintained by the prisoners at the penitentiary, who contributed their earnings from the fabrication of belts and other knick-knacks. As a man's turn came he could use this fund to pay lawyers seeking his release.

For fourteen years Packer served as prison florist while successive legal efforts on his behalf met without success. It seemed that his sun was setting.

But not yet. In 1900 the people of Colorado were again reminded of the man-eater. The Denver *Post*, always alert to circulation schemes, had hired a woman reporter called Polly Pry. She was a charter member of the sob-sisters. Her heart-rending feature articles usually appeared among the front pages.

On one of Polly's scouting expeditions to the penitentiary she came upon Packer. She summoned her ready sympathy, and soon the florid face of the *Post* was flowing with tears shed for the pitiful figure of Packer, tending his flowers behind prison walls. Why should he suffer when murderers and rapists were being freed daily by the governor? A pardon for Packer was demanded of the chief executive, and when he balked Miss Pry heaped on his gubernatorial shoulders a torrent of abuse.

Polly prevailed on Bonfils and Tammen, colorful proprietors of the *Post*, to hire a lawyer for Packer. Retained for this purpose was "Plug Hat" Anderson, who was to be paid a thousand dollars if he succeeded in freeing the prisoner. He was not to solicit or accept any fee from Packer.

After Anderson's efforts were under way Polly revisited Packer and heard from him that the lawyer had gouged him for a twenty-five dollar fee. She hurried to Bonfils and Tammen with the story, and they summoned Plug Hat. On his arrival at their office he was summarily cashiered and, as he left, the impulsive Bonfils planted an energetic foot against the barrister's rear. Anderson, fuming at this assault on his dignity, returned with felonious intent and a gun. Bonfils and Tammen dived for the shelter of the ponderous furniture, and Polly Pry seized Anderson's arm in an effort to deter him. He threw her from him and began pumping the trigger. Then, confident of his aim, he turned his back on the bloody scene and strode to police headquarters to surrender, certain in the conviction that he had done Denver a favor.

But apparently Bonfils and Tammen were going to survive. The *Post*, in its solicitous bulletins concerning the partners' chances of

recovery, stated that Bonfils had a throat injury. The location of Tammen's wound was not dwelt upon, but it was known by those in the inner circle that he wouldn't be comfortable sitting down for a while.

Packer was brought to Denver to testify at Anderson's trial, and the press published his reactions to a modern world after fourteen years behind bars. His case, being the underlying cause of the shooting fracas, was exhumed by rival papers and aired in all its aromatic detail. These post mortems of the evidence must have worked in his favor, for the governor finally succumbed to the *Post* campaign and granted a pardon.

Once free, Packer lost the public's interest. He became a hanger-on at the *Post,* serving as errand boy and body guard for his champions. In the latter capacity he was singularly effective, for men knew him by his deeds and didn't choose to risk his displeasure

His epilepsy seizures came more often, and he went to live on a farm near the suburb of Littleton. Mothers of the town used him for a convenient bogey man, threatening refractory children with the prospect of being turned over to the fearsome cannibal. His convulsions, punctuated with occasional antics brought about by an overdose of whiskey, added to the children's fears and they fled at his approach.

Lonely and broke, Packer sickened. Two charitable women cared for him in a hut in Deer Canyon until he died in 1907, without friends or relatives. Some generous people in Littleton provided for his burial.

A visitor to the little community may walk to the far corner of the cemetery and find a small tombstone marked, simply, A L F R E D P A C K E R. There is no reference to who he was, or how his life might have been different if, that wintry night back at Los Pinos agency in 1873, he had first asked for food instead of whiskey.

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